## Intragroup conflict and the interpersonal leadership circumplex: Matching leadership behaviors to conflict types

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# PART 7

# CONFLICT AND LEADERSHIP

## 25. Intragroup conflict and the interpersonal leadership circumplex: Matching leadership behaviors to conflict types

*Astrid C. Homan, Marleen Redeker and Reinout E. de Vries*

Many teams in organizations experience conflicts. For instance, top management teams often argue about the nature and the make-up of their hierarchy, a competitive reward structure often instigates conflicts between team members, and teams experience disagreements between members who support different courses of action as a result of their different backgrounds (see, for empirical illustrations, Greer and Van Kleef, 2010; Homan et al., 2007; Korsgaard et al., 2008). Intragroup conflict can be defined as "perceived incompatibilities or discrepant views" among team members (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003, p. 189). We focus on teams, because organizations rely more and more on teams (Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2007) due to increasing competition, consolidation, and innovation. Teams may outperform individuals in terms of the quality of the decisions they reach (Argote et al., 2000; Ilgen et al., 2005; Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006; see also Hinsz et al., 1997). However, because people within teams have to work closely together, the potential for the occurrence and experience of conflicts is quite high (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008).

As soon as team members experience incompatible goals, preferences, or behavior, they become aware of conflicts. This awareness can have very profound effects on important team outcomes, such as performance, satisfaction, information exchange, and quality of relationships (De Dreu and Beersma, 2005; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Spector and Jex, 1998; Tjosvold, 1998). The effects of conflicts in teams depend largely on how team members respond to and deal with conflicts (De Dreu et al., 2000). In this chapter, we propose that leaders can play a crucial role in the way teams cope with conflicts (Guzzo and Salas, 1995) and we argue that leaders should address different types of conflicts differentially. The relationships we discuss here assume that teams experience at least one type of these intragroup conflicts. Of course, there might be situations in which no intragroup conflicts are present, but these lie outside the scope of this chapter. Additionally, this chapter is not aimed at examining conflicts between team leaders and their teams, but focuses on how leaders can deal with conflict between their team members.

### INTRAGROUP RELATIONSHIP AND TASK CONFLICTS

Past work has distinguished two prevalent forms of intragroup conflict: task conflict and relationship conflict (for example, De Dreu and Beersma, 2005; De Wit et al., 2012;

Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954; Jehn, 1997; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Task conflicts pertain to disagreements among group members about the task being performed in terms of content and outcomes (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Relationship conflicts entail interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, such as personality differences or differences in norms and values (Jehn, 1995). Relationship conflicts can be caused by, among other things, different informational perspectives, different personalities, diverse norms and values, incompatible work ethics, or demographic differences (for example, van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Although recent theorizing has also distinguished process conflicts as a third conflict type (for example, De Wit et al., 2012), our theorizing will be limited to task and relationship conflict, as the effects of process conflict have been found to be less straightforward and more complex due to the overlap with both task and relationship conflicts (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003).

The outcomes of relationship conflicts seem to be relatively straightforward. In general, research has shown large negative effects of relationship conflicts on both soft and hard team outcomes (De Wit et al., 2012; see also Amason, 1996; De Dreu and Beersma, 2005; Jehn, 1995), such as lowered individual well-being (Dijkstra et al., 2005), lowered identification and trust (for example, Jehn et al., 2008; Rispens et al., 2007), deteriorated member commitment and turnover intentions (for example, Bayazit and Mannix, 2003; Raver and Gelfand, 2005), resulting in lowered group creativity and performance (for example, Farh et al., 2010; Jehn, 1997).

The effects of task conflict seem to be more inconsistent, both in empirical findings and theoretical reasoning. Task conflicts have been hypothesized to positively affect team functioning, because they prevent premature consensus seeking and inspire more critical thinking (for example, Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 2008). More specifically, disagreements about the task have been found to increase task understanding, overcome confirmation biases, and boost innovation (for example, De Dreu, 2006; Nemeth, 1995; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006). However, many studies have found negative (albeit weak) effects of task conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012). Finally, some studies have reported null effects of task conflicts on team outcomes (De Wit et al., 2012). The question then becomes why task conflicts might have these inconsistent effects.

A recent meta-analysis on intragroup conflicts sheds some light on this issue (De Wit et al., 2012). The effects of task conflicts seem to be contingent upon, among other things, the co-occurrence of relationship conflicts within the team (see also Gamero et al., 2008; Mooney et al., 2007). More specifically, this meta-analysis showed that task conflicts can have positive effects on both soft and hard team outcomes to the degree that teams do not also experience relationship conflicts. In other words, when the presence of task conflicts is not accompanied by relationship conflicts, task conflicts are more likely to have positive effects on desirable team outcomes. When task conflict co-occurs with relationship conflict, negative outcomes are more likely to occur. The inconsistent effects of task conflict can thus, partly, be explained by its interaction with relationship conflicts. These findings suggest that although both types of conflict may co-occur in teams, teams can also experience task conflicts independent of relationship conflicts. That is, some teams might be characterized by more task than relationship conflicts, whereas other teams might experience relatively more relationship than task conflicts.



The abovementioned effects of conflicts in teams make clear that effectively dealing with intragroup conflicts is crucial. Jehn and Bendersky (2003) proposed that the effects of relationship and task conflicts on different outcomes are contingent upon important moderators. In this respect, it has been shown that avoiding conflict (compared to actively dealing with conflicts) leads to detrimental outcomes such as conflict escalation, ineffectiveness, turnover, stress, and absenteeism (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Dijkstra et al., 2009; Tekleab et al., 2009; Zapf and Gross, 2001). Additionally, it has been found that task conflicts can instigate relationship conflicts when not adequately addressed (Greer et al., 2008; Simons and Peterson, 2000). We propose that leaders will play a crucial role in managing these types of conflicts (that is, they are potentially an important contingency factor). Importantly, because the effects of relationship and task conflict are different and initiate differential processes, we propose that dealing with these different types of conflicts requires different leadership behaviors. How leaders can address relationship and task conflicts is elaborated upon next. First, we explain in more detail how we conceptualize leadership.

## INTERPERSONAL LEADERSHIP CIRCUMPLEX

Previous work has shown that effective leadership (that is, influencing a group of people to obtain a certain goal; Stogdill and Coons, 1957; Yukl, 2010) may be a critical determinant of team functioning and outcomes (for example, Burke et al., 2006; Morgeson et al., 2010; Yukl, 2010; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Moreover, researchers have proposed that leaders play a role in the management of the development and occurrence of conflicts (for example, Kim et al., 1999; Morgeson et al., 2010; Zaccaro et al., 2001). For instance, Ayoko and Callan (2010) showed that charismatic leaders had a positive effect on the relationship between positive and negative conflict reactions and task performance in such a way that teams that experienced destructive reactions to conflict reported higher effectiveness when their leader scored higher (rather than lower) on vision and inspiration. Although this previous work speaks to leaders as conflict managers, there has been no systematic research into the behaviors that leaders should show in order to effectively manage task and relationship conflicts.

Rather than focusing on one leadership style or leadership distinction and answering the call for a more inclusive leadership approach (DeRue et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2002), we decided to connect the management of intragroup conflict to a recent comprehensive model on leadership: the leadership circumplex (CLS; Redeker et al., 2014; see also Vroom and Jago, 2007; Yukl, 2010). The CLS perceives leadership as an interpersonal interaction between leader and followers, and uses the interpersonal circumplex as a basis to categorize leadership behaviors (Redeker et al., 2014).

Interpersonal interactions can be organized by means of two main dimensions: communion (or affiliation/love) and agency (or control/dominance; for example, Abele and Wojciszke, 2007; Kiesler, 1983; Leary, 1957). Agency has been defined as the condition of being a differentiated individual, which is manifested in strivings for mastery and power. Communion is the condition of being part of a larger social or spiritual entity, which is manifested in striving for intimacy, union, and solidarity within that larger entity (Wiggins, 2003). The CLS differentiates many different leadership behaviors (both

positive and negative) based on their degree of agency and communion (see Figure 25.1 for a simplified visualization of the CLS).

Agentic leadership behaviors facilitate the understanding of task requirements, operating procedures, and obtainment of task-relevant information. Consequently, agentic leaders tend to focus on performance feedback, assignment of tasks, rewards, goal direction, establishment of effective communication channels, and boundary spanning to concentrate team members on the task at hand (for example, Burns, 1978; Judge et al., 2004; Pearce et al., 2003). Communal leadership behaviors deal with social interactions and attitudes that must be established to enable effective teamwork (for example, Hemphill and Coons, 1957; Judge et al., 2004). Leaders who show more communal behaviors exhibit coaching, consideration with personal problems, and promote participation, mutual respect, trust, and team coherence to create conflict-free and cohesive teams (for example, Bass, 1990, 1999; Judge et al., 2004; Kerr et al., 1974). Importantly, agentic and communal leadership behaviors are not mutually exclusive, rather, leaders may exhibit both or are relatively more likely to show one but not the other type of behavior. For instance, charismatic leadership was found to consist of a combination of agentic and communal behaviors (that is, as captured by the upper-right quadrant of the CLS; Redeker et al., 2014).

Supporting the link between leadership and the interpersonal circumplex, previous and more recent conceptualizations and styles of leadership show great resemblance between leadership scales and the agency (vertical axis) and communal (horizontal axis) dimensions of interpersonal circumplex (for example, De Vries, 2008; Judge et al., 2009; Redeker et al., 2014; Syroit, 1979). In this respect, it has been found that different leadership behaviors can be broken down into two broad dimensions (Burke et al., 2006; Fleishman et al., 1991): behaviors focused on task accomplishment (in line with the CLS, this will be labeled "agentic leadership" from here on) and behaviors focused on facilitating team relationships and/or development (labeled "communal leadership" from here on). This categorization is visualized in the distinction between initiating structure and consideration (for example, Judge et al., 2004), production- and employee-centered leadership (Kahn and Katz, 1953), task- and human-oriented leadership (Blake and Mouton, 1964), or charismatic/transformational and transactional leadership (Avolio et al., 1999; De Vries et al., 2002).

Moreover, the CLS also captures the more negative side of leadership, such as destructive or absent leadership. For instance, hostility appears to be inversely related to communion and unrelated to agency (Schaubroeck et al., 2007). Despotic leadership (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008), which is based on personal dominance and authoritarian self-interested behavior, has a negative relation with communion but is positively related to agency, which is captured by the upper-left quadrant of a circumplex. Finally, management-by-exception and laissez faire leaders (Avolio et al., 1999) are mainly characterized by being absent, which suggests a negative relation to agentic traits as well as to communion traits. Therefore, these "absent" styles may be captured by the lower-left side of a circumplex model.

The leadership circumplex and its distinction between agentic and communal leadership behaviors shows a strong conceptual overlap with the distinction between task and relationship conflict. Therefore, we decided to combine the contingency approach to conflicts (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003) with the contingency approach to leadership in



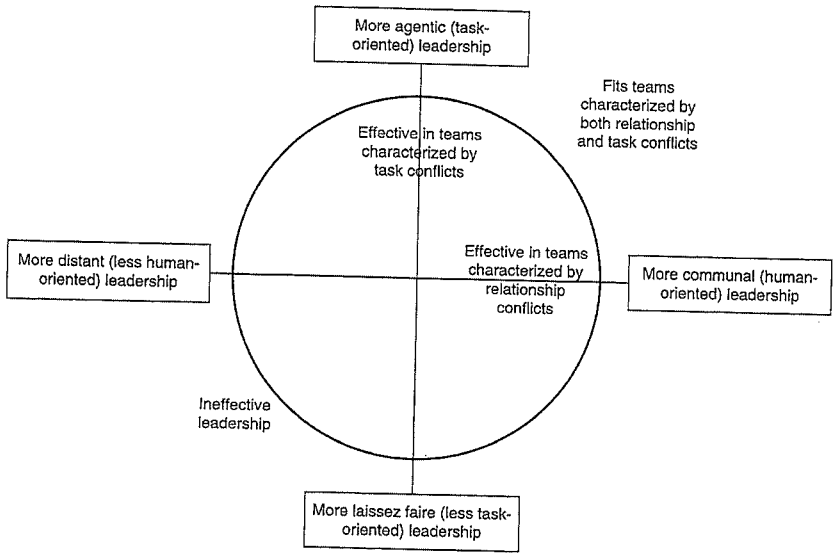


*Figure 25.1* *Matching the circumplex leadership model to managing intrateam task and relationship conflicts*

teams (Avolio, 2007; Burke et al., 2006; Yukl, 2010; Zaccaro et al., 2001), and propose that leaders should match their behaviors to the conflicts present in their teams by showing more agentic behaviors in teams characterized by task conflicts, and more communal behaviors in teams characterized by relationship conflicts.

**Leaders as Conflict Managers: Matching Behaviors to Intragroup Conflict(s)**

The work on team leadership has stressed the importance of contingent leadership (Fleishman et al., 1991; Osborn et al., 2002; also see Avolio, 2007; Bass, 1990), which proposes that leadership effectiveness is largely embedded in the context in which a leader operates. In short, this idea suggests that when the context changes, the effectiveness of specific leadership behaviors also changes (Osborn et al., 2002). Similarly, Jehn and Bendersky (2003) propose that the effects of certain types of conflicts on team outcomes are contingent upon contextual factors, such as leadership. Therefore, we argue that the management of intragroup conflict requires different leadership behaviors depending on the type(s) of conflict that is/are present within the team. More specifically, we propose that teams that are characterized by task conflicts will require relatively more task-oriented, agentic behaviors. Similarly, teams that experience mainly relationship conflicts will require relatively more human-oriented, communal leadership behaviors. We visualize our reasoning in Figure 25.1, and we put forward some specific propositions below.

**Relationship conflicts and communal leadership**

Teams that are characterized by many personal disagreements will experience deteriorated relationships within the team, resulting in low liking and trust, and inadequate communication (for example, Pelled, 1996). We propose that leaders who are relatively more communal will be better able to deal with these negative relational processes than more agentic leaders. That is, leaders who attend to individual well-being, listen to personal problems, solve frictions, and increase trust and coherence will be able to eliminate relationship conflicts by bringing together the opposing parties. This strategy can work through a number of processes.

For one, communal behaviors have been found to be able to instill a common in-group identity (Gaertner et al., 1993). Communal leaders stress egalitarian norms, cooperation, and promote positive interpersonal contact (Bass, 1990; compare with van Knippenberg et al., 2011). These behaviors have been found to be a prerequisite for reducing interpersonal tensions in teams (for example, Gaertner et al., 1990; Huo et al., 1996; Sethi, 2000; Sherif and Sherif, 1969). Second, communal leaders acknowledge and appreciate individual feelings and ideas (Fleishman and Peters, 1962) and stimulate participation and positive relationships between group members. This makes it likely that they will perceive and treat their followers as unique individuals (Homan and Greer, 2013). This individuation should in turn boost feelings of self-verification and positively influence the relationships within the team as a whole and result in better-performing teams (Swann et al., 2004). Finally, communal leaders use relationship management and trust building to bring their subordinates closer together. By facilitating positive and respectful contact between all team members, positive intragroup relations can be established and relationship conflicts will diminish (Webber, 2002; see also Matheson and Cole, 2004).

*Proposition 1: Teams that are characterized by relationship conflicts will perform better when being led by leaders who show relatively more communal leadership behaviors than agentic leadership behaviors, because communal leaders will: (1) instigate a cooperative group identity; (2) address interpersonal issues; and (3) build intragroup trust.*

**Task conflicts and agentic leadership**

Although we know that divergent ideas and interests might set up conditions for critical thinking and limit consensus seeking (for example, Jehn, 1995; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006), we also know that too much task conflict can distract from effective task progress and might spill over into relationship conflicts (for example, De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Simons and Peterson, 2000). These findings illustrate the importance of effectively coping with and structuring task-related conflicts. In this respect, leaders might be extremely influential in providing the right conditions under which task conflicts benefit team functioning. We propose that leaders who are relatively more agentic (that is, more focused on the task at hand) will be better able to manage task conflicts than leaders who show relatively more communal behaviors. Leaders who aid the understanding of task requirements, operating procedures, and obtainment of task information by using rewards, feedback information, assignments of tasks, establishing communication channels, goal direction, and boundary spanning will facilitate the effective use of task conflicts for a number of reasons.

First, agentic leaders structure tasks and procedures and provide team members with a clear context in which they work together. This structuring can provide team members with a shared task reality, which promotes the team's retrieval and combination of divergent information (Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch, 2009; Stasser et al., 1989). Second, agentic leaders instigate communication channels and make clear who knows what and how to utilize different representations and backgrounds (Pearce et al., 2003). This aids teams to use their task conflicts in an effective manner. Third, agentic leaders are likely to enhance the accountability of team members (London et al., 1997). This accountability has been found to positively influence the epistemic motivation of the team members, which determines their willingness and ability to make use of divergent perspectives on the task (De Dreu et al., 2008).



*Proposition 2: Teams that are characterized by task conflicts will perform better when being led by leaders who show relatively more agentic leadership behaviors than communal leadership behaviors, because agentic leaders will: (1) create a shared task reality; (2) improve the utilization of different backgrounds; and (3) increase epistemic motivation.*

**Co-occurrence of task and relationship conflicts**

So far, we have discussed the occurrence of task and relationship conflict separately. However, we know from previous work (for example, De Wit et al., 2012), that task and relationship conflicts often co-occur. Similarly, we have focused on the two leadership dimensions independently, although we know that these can also be exhibited at the same time (for example, Judge et al., 2004). So, how should leaders address a situation in which their team experiences both task and relationship conflicts? We propose that in this case, leaders will be most efficient by exhibiting behaviors that are high in both communion and agency (that is, focus on the task as well as the relationships within the team). In previous literature, the combination of showing both agentic and communal behaviors has been labeled "high-high" leadership (Judge et al., 2004; Kerr et al., 1974; Yukl, 2010). It follows from the above two propositions that these high-high leaders should best be able to adequately deal with teams in which both types of conflicts are present, because they will be focused on building positive relationships as well as utilizing divergent task- or function-related viewpoints. For instance, charismatic leadership has been proposed to integrate both communal and agentic leadership behaviors by inspiring people in such a way that both task and personal goals are important (Yukl, 2010).

*Proposition 3: Teams that are characterized by both relationship and task conflicts will perform better when being led by leaders who show both agentic and communal leadership behaviors rather than leaders who score low on one or both of these leadership behaviors.*

**The Importance of Contingent Leadership**

Above, it was stated that leaders should show behaviors that match the conflicts present within the team. More specifically, we argued that task conflicts could best be managed by relatively more agentic, task-oriented leadership. Relationship conflicts require more communal, human-oriented leadership. A combination of task and relationship conflicts can best be addressed by leadership scoring high on both communal and agentic

behaviors. Although we explained why matching is important, one might wonder what would happen if there is a mismatch between leadership behaviors and the conflicts present in the team.

First, how might communal leadership go wrong in teams that experience task conflicts? In this respect, we know that task conflicts might spill over into relationship conflicts (Simons and Peterson, 2000). Giving much attention to relationships in teams that do not experience relational conflicts might distract from the work at hand and might even create relational conflicts that were non-existent beforehand (Wageman et al., 2009). Additionally, the potentially positive effects of task conflicts are caused by a focus on unshared rather than shared information and stimulation to not agree too quickly on a course of action (for example, Gigone and Hastie, 1993; Janis, 1982; Stasser and Titus, 1985). These positive effects are hindered if leaders focus too much on promoting harmonious relationships, because too much sharedness and cohesion will encourage conformity pressure and consensus seeking and thereby limit constructive controversy and the exchange of unique information (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1982; Postmes et al., 2001; Tjosvold, 2008). Thus, we propose that a mismatch between task conflicts and leadership behaviors will at least be detrimental for the constructive use of task conflicts, and at worst set up task conflicts to spill over into relationship conflicts.

*Proposition 4: Teams that are characterized by task conflicts will perform worse when being led by leaders who show relatively more communal leadership behaviors than agentic leadership behaviors, because communal leaders will: (1) make potential relationship issues more salient; (2) increase conformity pressure; and (3) decrease the exchange of unique information.*

Second, why would a focus on the task harm teams that are characterized by relationship conflicts? Relationship conflicts prompt distrust, miscommunication, and dislike within the team. If leaders focus on agentic behaviors, such as modeling and structuring the task, explicating communication channels, and providing rewards, they ignore the fact that people within the team do not work well together (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Research on inter(sub)group bias has shown that conflict attitudes and behaviors are difficult to counter and that one needs effort and time to improve relationships within the team (Sherif and Sherif, 1969). If conflicts are not adequately managed, they might spiral out of control and escalate (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001; Simons and Peterson, 2000). In this respect, research has shown that avoiding relationship conflicts (compared to actively dealing with relationship conflicts) leads to negative outcomes such as ineffectiveness, turnover, stress, and absenteeism (for example, Blake and Mouton, 1964; Dijkstra et al., 2009; Tekleab et al., 2009; Zapf and Gross, 2001). Therefore, leaders who show relatively more agentic behaviors will have a detrimental influence on teams with relationship conflicts. In sum, we would propose that a mismatch between experienced relationship conflicts and leadership behaviors will fuel the deterioration of relationships.

*Proposition 5: Teams that are characterized by relationship conflicts will perform worse when being led by leaders who show relatively more agentic leadership behaviors than communal leadership behaviors, because agentic leaders will ignore interpersonal frictions.*



## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we used a contingency approach to integrate insights from the leadership literature with theories regarding intragroup conflict. We proposed that different forms of intragroup conflict (that is, task and relationship) require different interpersonal behaviors by leaders. Below, we address some potential boundary conditions of our reasoning as well as some additional issues that warrant future research.

### Low-Low Leadership

As can be seen in Figure 25.1, we propose that leaders who show behaviors both low on agency and communion (that is, laissez faire and distant behaviors), will be ineffective in leading teams in general. Although we started out by stating that our focus was on teams which experienced at least one type of conflict and teams without any conflicts are beyond the scope of this chapter, we do want to stress here that our reasoning does not imply that teams that do not experience conflicts should be led by leaders refraining from both agentic and communal behaviors. Although we predict that it will be very difficult to observe conflict-free teams, these teams might also benefit most from high-high leadership in order to avoid potential relationship conflicts and promote the effective use of future task conflicts. High-high leaders can inspire new goals, create new challenges, and develop teams to be able to effectively deal with future changes in the environment.

### Process Conflict

As stated before, we excluded process conflict from our reasoning above, due to the fact that task and relationship conflicts nicely overlap with the distinction between agentic and communal leadership. Moreover, the effects of process conflict seem to be more complex than the effects of task and relationship conflict, because these effects seem to sometimes mirror the effects of relationship conflicts and sometimes (although relatively less often) the effects of task conflicts (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). However, we can of course speculate on what leader behaviors would fit teams characterized by process conflicts. Process conflicts are disagreements among group members about the logistics of task accomplishment, such as the delegation of tasks and responsibilities (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Process conflicts often tend to get highly emotional and personal (Greer and Jehn, 2007), and, consequently, most research has found negative associations between process conflicts and team outcomes (for example, Behfar et al., 2011; De Wit et al., 2012). We would therefore propose that communal leadership behaviors would be a better match for teams with process conflicts, similar to teams characterized by relationship conflicts.

### Task Characteristics

One potential boundary condition of the effectiveness of our contingency approach to leadership in managing intragroup conflicts is task type. De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that tasks that required more exchange of information (for example, creativity or decision-making tasks) benefited from task conflict more than simpler production tasks. This could imply that task-oriented leadership is less effective in managing task

conflict for teams that do not need to exchange and process information. Moreover, research has shown that relationship conflicts matter more in teams that work on highly interdependent tasks that require a lot of cooperation (for example, Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Timmerman, 2000). This could imply that leaders should especially show communal behaviors as a response to relationship conflicts when teams are working on more interdependent tasks. However, a more recent meta-analysis on the effects of intragroup conflicts did not support the moderating role of task type (De Wit et al., 2012). Future research could therefore set out to test our contingency approach in different task settings.

## CONCLUSION

Our focus on leaders as crucial conflict managers yields valuable insights for coping with intragroup conflicts that may be used by managers, consultants, politicians, school boards, families, and other professionals who frequently deal with conflicts. We propose that leaders and policy makers should adapt a contingency approach to conflict management and match their leadership behaviors to the conflicts that are present within the team. When effectively managed, intragroup conflict does not have to harm team processes and can even benefit group functioning by making teams more critical and less consensus seeking.

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